



BOYANT BERRIES: Flooded bogs, like this one on Temple Street, bring cranberries floating to the top, ready to be harvested for holiday feasts.

Improved Cranberry Crop Harvesting Hope for Growers

By KEITH E. MARTIN

Bogs across the South Shore are starting to show their scarlet hue as cranberries are popping up from their depths, and with their arrival, raising the spirits of some growers.

Following two years of United States Department of Agriculture-mandated set-aside on cranberry supply and a drought in 2002, last year's crop did not produce opti-

mism on the part of growers with insect and fruit rot wiping out a lot of the harvest.

This year, however, the crop seems to be on an upswing, according to Jeffrey LaFleur, executive director of the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association.

"The crop has greatly improved over the last several years and a relatively rainy season has given us a decent crop this year with good

color and good quality," he said.

LaFleur said there is some optimism on the part of cranberry growers in the region, but did caution, however, that whenever the crop is good nationwide there could be the situation of too many cranberries in the market, which would affect prices as supply could exceed demand.

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One of Duxbury's cranberry growers agrees with both parts of LaFleur's assessment of the cranberry crop for 2004.

"Things are better this year with a good quality cranberry," said Earle Ricker, a third generation farmer in town. "If we have a lot of cranberries this season, that's a lot we have to sell. If Wisconsin is down on their production, that might offset it with Massachusetts' numbers, but if they are both big crops, we might be looking at a set-aside next year because they will freeze the current crop."

According to statistics from the USDA, they are projecting a crop of 1.8 million barrels of cranberries from Massachusetts, an increase of 28 percent from 2003's gathering of 1.4 million. Wisconsin, the nation's largest producer of cranberries, is expected to produce 3.5 million berries, a 1 percent decrease from 2003, due in part to weather.

LaFleur said that depending on the rest of the season, the USDA's projection for Massachusetts could be low, as it is possible the state could produce two million barrels,



Cranberry farmers Earle and Jack Ricker dry-pick their family's bog off Mayflower Street for cranberries that will head to Ocean Spray and then to homes around the nation.

but last year, they also over-predicted by 300,000 barrels.

"It's really about having a great crop...so it's difficult to say how the numbers will turn out," he said.

Duxbury's Bob Merry, equipment manager for Merryland Cranberries, said that their crop is not great so far, due to water bugs and a little bit of recent frost. Merry said that while this may be a so-so harvest, he is confident things will change as they start to flood the bogs for water-picked berries at their Temple Street bog.

"I'd say next year is going to be better for us," he said. "We're not up an awful lot yet so far this year."

Merry did say that a number of area cranberry growers are quiet this season as they

have decided that the cost in machinery, staffing and fuel to pick berries would not be equaled or surpassed by what they would take in.

"For a lot of these folks, it is their life, and it takes a lot to keep going," said Merry, who's worked for his uncle Stan's company for 18 years.

Recently, Ricker and brother Jack were dry picking berries in one of their two bogs in town for fresh fruit berries for which he gets an incentive from Ocean Spray, for whom he has provided berries since 1971. Those berries dry picked, he said, get more color in storage and then hit the market around Thanksgiving for consumers to purchase.

While only a couple of loads have been for fresh fruit

and the added incentive, Ricker is happy with the result so far.

Other berries Ricker gathers are sent to Ocean Spray's Middleboro plant, where they are washed and sorted for use in the company's myriad of cranberry-related products.

In September, Ocean Spray and one of its largest rivals, Northland, teamed up on a landmark agreement that kept the Northland brand and retail juice business intact. Ocean Spray gained a processing plant and Northland's existing inventory of frozen and unprocessed cranberries, as well as a first option of some of Northland's Wisconsin bogs.

LaFleur said the move does not have a direct impact on Massachusetts' growers, but rather gives Ocean Spray greater control of the marketplace by taking the cranberries

from Northland out of private ownership and under Ocean Spray's coop program.

Ricker said the deal gets his support because if Ocean Spray didn't buy the plants a competitor might have, which would have affected the farmers under contract.

As for his own supply of berries, Ricker said that despite the rough years of the past and his hope for this year, he is dedicated to growing cranberries and knows that good times and bad come with the vocation.

"Look at dairy farms; they haven't turned a profit in years," he said. "But it's in your blood and it's been in my family since the 1920s, so I've seen ups and downs, and it's tough. But this year looks good so we have to hope for a good market."

CRANBERRY PRODUCTION BY STATE (IN BARRELS)

STATE	2003	2004*
Massachusetts	1,406,000	1,800,000
New Jersey	480,000	480,000
Oregon	500,000	550,000
Washington	190,000	185,000
Wisconsin	3,607,000	3,560,000
United States Total	6,183,000	6,575,000

Information from the USDA, New England Agricultural Statistics Service
*projected